



From Vision to Reality



Volunteers with the French NGO Action Contre la Faim, Action Against Hunger, raise awareness about global malnutrition near the Eiffel Tower in Paris for World Food Day.
AP Images/Thibault Camus

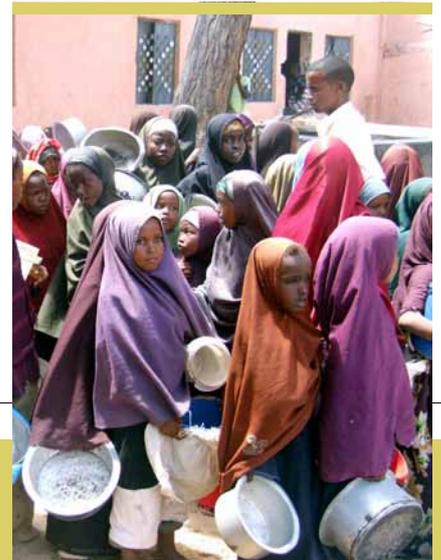
People who establish non-governmental organizations (NGOs) often have a powerful desire to change the world for the better. You may start a project and later decide to establish an NGO to expand and sustain that work. Or you may see a need and know you want to establish an NGO from the beginning. However you decide to form an NGO, once you develop a clear vision and mission, choose a name, and create a governing structure for your group, it is time to turn your vision into action.

Prioritize Projects

If you envision a society in which youth are vital contributors to social, political, and economic development, you might start an NGO called Youth Voices to help build the capacity of marginalized youth to participate in their communities. You may have many different ideas for how the NGO should carry out its mission. Youth Voices could teach youth to use cameras and explore issues in their community through photography. Or it could teach youth how government

works, what their rights and responsibilities are as citizens, and how to advocate for change.

An NGO in Somalia distributes food to displaced children.
AP Images/Mohamed Sheikh Nor



With so many ideas and goals, a young NGO can easily overextend itself by trying to do too much. You will need to balance what is most important with what you can accomplish. Make a list of all your ideas and then prioritize them. You should consider the needs and interests of the community you plan to serve, but also the experience of the NGO's founders, the resources needed for each project or activity, and the resources you already have.

Discussions about priorities can be difficult, but if you come together and discuss your various ideas, your NGO will be stronger. You should start small in order to gain experience, show success, and increase your visibility. From there, you will be able to garner more resources and eventually take on more projects.

Build Relationships

One of the most important resources you will need to attract is relationships—with businesses, other NGOs, universities, government agencies, schools, and neighbors—to support your work and create advocates for your cause. If Youth Voices decides to provide “Know Your Rights and Responsibilities” workshops, you will need meeting space, speakers, and training materials. Map out the relationships you already have. You might find that someone in the group knows an NGO with a large community room, another knows a professor who is an expert on civil rights, and another has a friend with a printing business.

Next you should set up meetings to ask for their support. Make your request specific and tell the potential partners how you can help them in return. For example,

Volunteers with Save the Children package relief supplies after the 2004 Indonesian tsunami. *AP Images/Suzanne Plunkett*



Girls in India attend school with support from an anti-trafficking NGO.
© Andrew Aitchison/In Pictures/Corbis

Youth Voices might ask the other NGO for meeting space for eight two-hour sessions one day per week in July and August. In return, Youth Voices will help recruit volunteers for the NGO's next community event.

Find Early Money

No matter how many relationships you have, there may still be some things that require money. If so,

you will need to find “seed funding.” Funders who give “seed grants” understand that new NGOs do not have a long record of success, and they are often willing to take a risk on a good idea and the people who will carry it out. You will need to provide a detailed proposal describing what you plan to do and how you plan to do it, as well as a description of the qualifications of the NGO's leaders.

Recruit Volunteers

In addition to donations and seed money, you will need more volunteers. But before you say “come to our next planning meeting,” think carefully about what volunteers will do and how you will supervise them. Be respectful of their time and ready to put them to work. For example, Youth Voices might need volunteers to recruit participants or clean up after the workshops.



Document Your Progress

Finally, to turn your vision into sustainable action, you need to have a plan for documenting and evaluating your efforts. Define the outcomes you hope to achieve, including what participants will learn and how they will benefit. You can use surveys, video testimonials, or other creative ways to measure the impact of your work. Such measurements can be powerful tools in attracting new sources of funding and additional volunteers.

To document the project, make a list of every step in the process, keep records of donations, write down the activities you carried out and what happened in the workshops. Create written job descriptions for volunteers, and keep track of their time and activities. This way, when you do the project next time, you will know



A woman who lost her leg during the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake in China embroiders at an NGO workshop.
Evens Lee/Color China Photo/AP Images

what to do and how to improve. This information will also be useful when you begin looking for larger amounts of money.

Mobilize Others

With a well-defined project, relationships mobilized for real support, and a base of volunteers, your NGO is ready to get to work. By measuring your impact and collecting success stories, you will be able to show others how your NGO is changing lives and building a better society. And in turning your vision into a reality, you will not only help mobilize more support for your organization, you may even inspire others to take action themselves.

Students in Bangladesh study on an NGO-run floating school boat. © David Bathgate/Corbis

